



1942

The Influence of the Symbolists and the Impressionists on Claude Debussy

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Recommended Citation

McDonagh, Marie A., "The Influence of the Symbolists and the Impressionists on Claude Debussy" (1942). *Master's Theses*. Paper 277.
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THE INFLUENCE OF THE SYMBOLISTS AND THE IMPRESSIONISTS
ON CLAUDE DEBUSSY

by
Marie A. McDonagh

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
Loyola University
June, 1942

VITA

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INTRODUCTION

France, during the latter years of the nineteenth and with the beginning of the twentieth centuries is marked with a great change in all the arts. It was an era of individualism which brought about a development in every field: Cézanne and Monet in painting, Rodin in sculpture, Mallarmé and Verlaine in poetry, and Claude Debussy in music.

Speaking to his imaginary visitor Monsieur Croche, Debussy remarked:

J'osai lui dire que des hommes avaient cherché, les uns dans la poésie, les autres dans la peinture (à grand' peine j'y ajoutai quelques musiciens) à secouer la vieille poussière des traditions, et que cela n'avait eu d'autre résultat que de les faire traiter de symbolistes ou d'impressionistes; termes commodes pour mépriser son semblable.¹

Revolt against tradition manifested itself early in Debussy's life, long before he found himself in the midst of the movement that absorbed Paris and which so strongly affected and influenced him.

In tracing the life of the composer in Chapter I, I have pointed out the circumstances, tendencies, and associations that had direct bearing on the development of the man and of

¹Claude Debussy, Monsieur Croche, Antidilettante. Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1921, p. 20.

the artist.

In Chapter II I have briefly explained the symbolist movement and have tried to show in detail how Debussy transferred the technique of the symbolists to music in the poems he chose for his songs and in the Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune.

Chapter III has been devoted entirely to the opera Pelléas et Mélisande and I have endeavored to point out in comments on both orchestra and text how Debussy has enhanced the Maeterlinck drama in tonal color and legendary atmosphere and has veiled it in elusive suggestiveness.

In Chapter IV I have dealt with Debussy's compositions for orchestra and piano to show how he also used in them the technique of the symbolists and the impressionists. Illusions, imagery, fantasy, longings, and dreams are evoked in the music.

It has not been my purpose to be technical and to analyze according to musical opinion; that I have deliberately avoided. I have only tried to show how closely the poets of France were linked with the music of Debussy. To them the world is indebted for a truly great "musicien français."

CHAPTER I

The life of Achille-Claude Debussy is not an open book for he lived largely in a world of his own dreams, loving seclusion and solitude and happiest in communing with nature which he studied in all its moods and aspects.

He tells us in Monsieur Croche Antidilettante:

Je m'étais attardé dans les campagnes remplies d'automne où me retenait invinciblement la magie des vieilles forêts. De la chute des feuilles d'or célébrant la glorieuse agonie des arbres, du grêle angelus ordonnant aux champs de s'endormir, montait une voix douce et persuasive qui conseillait le plus parfait oubli. Le soleil se couchait tout seul sans que nul paysan songeât à prendre, au premier plan, une attitude lithographique. Bêtes et gens rentraient paisibles, ayant accompli une besogne anonyme dont la beauté avait ceci de spécial qu'elle ne sollicitait pas plus l'encouragement que la désapprobation. . . Elles étaient loin, les discussions d'art où des noms de grands hommes prennent parfois l'apparence de 'gros mots.' Elle était oubliée la petite fièvre artificielle et mauvaise des 'premières'; j'étais seul et délicieusement désintéressé; peut-être n'ai-je jamais plus aimé la musique qu'à cette époque où je n'en entendais jamais parler. Elle m'apparaissait dans sa beauté totale et non plus par petits fragments symphoniques ou lyriques surchauffés et étriés.¹

It was at Saint-Germain-en-Laye on August 22, 1862, in a simple home above the china shop kept by his parents, Manuel-Achille Debussy and Victorine Manoury Debussy that Achille-

¹M. Croche Antidilettante, pp. 23-24.

Claude, the eldest of five children, was born. According to the records of the church of St. Germain, he was christened on July 31, 1864. A sister of his father, Octavie de la Ferronnière was his godmother and Achille-Antoine Arosa, an influential friend of the family was his godfather. When Achille-Claude was about three years old his family left St. Germain-en-Laye and made their home in Clichy-Paris. So far as has been recorded there was nothing extraordinary about the early years of the child. His primary education was the usual one, but shy and retiring by nature he did not take part with the other children in dancing and singing French folk songs, but watched them from a distance at their play. He took great pleasure in collecting and mounting butterflies with which he decorated the walls of his room. From magazines he cut out prints and colorful scenes to feast his eyes on when alone. On Sundays and holidays in company with his father he would take walks in the parks and gardens to hear the open air concerts.

When he was six years old and for several summer seasons after, he visited at Cannes with his godparents and it was there that he possibly had his first glimpse of the sea, which all his life was to be dear to him and which he depicted in his music in all its grandeur and ever-changing moods. There, too,

he enjoyed a life of luxury for Arosa was a man of means, a banker with excellent taste, who indulged the boy generously. But for young Achille, these pleasures were not lasting; his godfather married another woman and passed out of his life. To be disillusioned at such an impressionable age caused the boy to become even more shy and retiring than he had been and for solace he turned to nature; he took long walks in the woods or sat for hours brooding alone by the sea.

To Arosa, however, must be given the credit for starting his godson on his musical career rather than having him go into naval service as the elder Debussy had planned for his son. Arosa was a lover of the arts and was an excellent judge of modern paintings, prizing many of the better ones in his own personal collection. Young Achille showed an aptitude for painting, but Arosa wished him to have a musical education also and while still at Cannes he placed him under Cerutti, an Italian, for his first lessons in piano. The old professor did not credit the child with any unusual talent, but had a fondness for him and wanted to be near him to keep a close watch over him.

It was for a former pupil of Chopin, one Mme. Maute de Fleurville, the mother-in-law of Paul Verlaine, to discover the potential artist in the boy. When she heard him play she was

immediately impressed and begged him to let her take him in hand. Old Cerutti was overjoyed. Here was a great opportunity for the boy. With great enthusiasm the lessons began and in a few months under the careful tutelage of an artist who gave her service gratuitously, Achille prepared for the rigid entrance examinations to the Paris Conservatoire which he took and passed successfully.

In the autumn of 1873 in his eleventh year he was registered in the classes of the best instructors in the Conservatoire. The shy and awkward youth was a misfit in his new surroundings. At the time he was described as "un gros garçon court, massif, trapu, timide, gauche, vêtu modestement comme un enfant du peuple, avec l'allure étrange d'un petit bohémien. Sa tête très allongée, au front bas et saillant (le 'double front' qui avait surpris sa famille lors de sa naissance), se coiffait d'un béret de marin à pompon rouge, souvenir de Cannes et de l'une de ses premières vacances, béret qui l'élève musicien conserva longtemps."²

He was made fun of by most of his fellow students and some of the older instructors considered him an oddity for the queer musical thoughts that he tried to express and for his strange interpretations of the classics. Yet in spite of all this he

²Léon Vallas, Claude Debussy et Son Temps. Paris: F. Alcan, 1932, p. 5.

was acknowledged an excellent pianist and he carried off many medals of award in competitive examinations.

But he was not happy in composition classes to be forced to adhere to the iron clad rules of traditional harmony. He was eager to write but what he had to say could not be expressed if he was to keep within the narrow limitations of the musical formulas that he was taught. He had heard convent bells ringing out matins, the angelus from a distant church, military trumpets and bugles from an old garrison; all these produced tones and overtones that were pleasing to hear yet they followed no harmonic law. Why, he argued, could he not make use of them in his own writing? Why could he not reproduce in music such color and perfume in the diverse degrees of intensity as he felt them? He insisted that his ear alone was his guide and as early as his fourteenth year made his first attempt to write in his own particular musical language. He composed a song to "Nuit d'étoiles," a poem of Théodore de Banville in which he totally disregarded the rules of traditional harmony. It was the beginning of a persistent revolt. Such presumption irked some of his masters who now looked upon him with contempt and disfavor. Two, however, remained loyal to him for they recognized his unusual art. They were Lavignac and Guiraud, younger instructors with more open minds than the

others; they cautioned him to be patient and conservative while he was still subject to examinations and competitions. Guiraud's comment on the boy's first efforts was: "C'est très intéressant, tout ça, mais il faudra le réserver pour plus tard; ou bien, vous n'aurez jamais le Prix de Rome!"³

In the summer of 1880 good fortune smiled on Debussy. Upon the recommendation of Marmontel, his instructor in the upper piano class at the conservatory, Mme. von Meck, the patroness of Tchaikowsky, engaged "Bussyk," as she affectionately referred to him, as a family pianist. In a letter addressed to Peter Ilyitch, Mme. von Meck spoke of the new visitor in her home.

Yesterday a young pianist arrived from Paris, recommended to me by Marmontel. I brought him here to take care of the children during the summer and to play with me. This young man possesses a real virtuosity, but it seems to me that his expression leaves much to be desired, although he is a splendid accompanist. He is young, however, only twenty. He hasn't lived enough yet and probably has not suffered at all. . .⁴

At the Château de Chenonceaux, Achille again tasted of the luxuries that he had known at Cannes with uncle Arosa. He lived sumptuously in the elegant atmosphere of an aristocratic home. His duties were not difficult and he was well paid for his summer holidays. He gave lessons to the children in the

³Léon Vallas, op. cit., p. 29.

⁴Nadejda Von Meck and Catherine D. Bowen, Beloved Friend. New York: Random House, 1937, p. 377.

mornings, played four-handed music with Mme. von Meck in the afternoon, doing the music, almost entirely, of Tschaikowsky. In the evening the family assembled for a musicale. He accompanied Julia, the oldest daughter, who sang, and with a Polish violinist and a Russian cellist, also engaged musicians, he took no end of delight in playing trios.

There were hours in the day when Bussyk was free to do as he pleased; he climbed the Alps; he took long walks alone or with Sophie von Meck to whom he was attracted the first moment he saw her. All too soon the happy holiday ended and he was forced to return to Paris leaving his heart behind with Sophie.

He resumed his studies at the Conservatoire, still at odds with some of his teachers. Desirous to earn money, he became a professional accompanist. Among those for whom he played was a Mme. Vasnier whose pleasing voice, appearance, and charm instantly won his admiration. For the present Sophie was forgotten. That there was a liaison between Debussy and Mme. Vasnier has been suggested by some biographers; others claim it was only a very deep friendship.

The doors of the Vasnier home were opened wide to him. Each day he went there to play for madame and would stay on to study and compose. It was inspiring for him to work in the quiet of such elegant surroundings and in the presence of the

lovely lady to whom he dedicated many songs. A place was set for him at the dinner table and often he stayed on to pass the evenings to play cards and chat with M. Vasnier who also became his friend and from whom he learned much and took wise counsel.

Summer came again and he rejoined the von Mecks who greeted him affectionately. They traveled in Italy and Germany and he broadened with the life and culture that he enjoyed. When the time came to leave in the fall, Mme. von Meck, who, with the rest of her family, had grown extremely fond of the "petit Parisien," presented him with a gold watch and chain as a parting gift and asked him to return the following summer, this one to be passed on their estate in Russia.

He was met by the family in Moscow where they spent several days visiting points of interest in the city and attending concerts and the opera. His sensitive ears and eyes were always on the alert to capture new impressions and he was ever listening for new sounds and musical coloring. The gypsy music of the Russians fascinated him and he showed a keen interest in the Russian national music, newly born in the school founded by Glinka who headed the famous group known as "The Five." They, too, were breaking away from the traditional and were creating fresh musical idioms. It gave him courage and self assurance and when he reached "Brailow," the country place of the von

Mecks he spent most of his free time in writing.

An abrupt ending came to Bussyk's happy associations with the aristocratic Russians. Sophie von Meck had grown up; she was no longer the little girl to whom he was attracted three summers earlier and now he believed himself madly in love with her. He went to her mother to beg her to permit him to marry Sophie. The answer was his dismissal; his bags were packed and he was ordered to leave immediately. Nothing was more absurd than the union of "a von Meck and a Bussy, penniless minstrel from Paris boulevards!"

Heartbroken he returned home and back to the Conservatoire to continue his studies for two years more, entering all the competitions open to him. At last he was ready for the preliminary examination for the Grand Prix de Rome which is held each year. The successful candidate receives a scholarship to live at the Villa Medici in Rome at the expense of the French Government, there to devote himself to his artistic endeavors, and from time to time submit his compositions to the Institut. These works are called the "Envois de Rome."

Before Debussy was twenty-two years of age, he was awarded the Grand Prix, which he ridiculed later in M. Croche Anti-dilettante.

"Le prix de Rome est un jeu ou plutôt un sport national. On en apprend les règles dans des en-

droits nommés: Conservatoire, École des Beaux-Arts, etc. . . Or, en arrivant à Rome, on ne sait pas grand'chose,--tout au plus sait-on son métier!--et l'on voudrait que ces jeunes gens, déjà troublés par un complet changement de vie, se donnent à eux-mêmes les leçons d'énergie nécessaires à une âme d'artiste. C'est impossible! Et si l'on peut lire le rapport annuel sur les envois de Rome, on s'étonnera de la sévérité de ses termes; ça n'est pas la faute des pensionnaires si leur esthétique est un peu en désordre, mais bien celle de ceux qui les envoient dans un pays où tout parle de l'art le plus pur en les laissant libres d'interpréter cet art à leur guise.

"Au surplus, le flegme académique, avec lequel ces messieurs de l'Institut désignent celui d'entre tous ces jeunes gens qui sera artiste, me frappe par son ingénuité? Qu'en savent-ils? Eux-mêmes sont-ils bien sur d'être des artistes? Où prennent-ils donc le droit de diriger une destinée aussi mystérieuse? Vraiment, il semble qu'en ce cas, ils feraient mieux de s'en remettre au simple jeu de la 'courte paille', qui sait? le hasard est parfois si spirituel...Mais non, il faut chercher ailleurs...Ne pas juger sur des oeuvres de commande et d'une forme telle qu'il est impossible de savoir exactement si ces jeunes gens savent leur métier de musicien...Qu'on leur donne, si l'on y tient absolument, un 'certificat de hautes études,' mais pas un certificat 'd'imagination,' c'est inutilement grotesque!"⁵

It is obvious that Debussy's sojourn in the Roman capital was a failure musically. He felt himself imprisoned and the forced routine thrust upon him hampered his freedom of expression. Often he would steal away for solace and inspiration to the church of San Maria dell'Anima to enjoy its architectural

⁵M. Croche *Antidilettante*, pp. 27-30.

beauty and colorful interior and to listen to the liturgical works of Palestrina and Orlando de Lasso whose use of the old church modes stirred and fascinated him.

To meet the demands of the Institut, he composed his "Envois de Rome," which he admitted gave him no satisfaction and were not a free, natural expression of his own ideas, but rather the oppressive submission to specified requirements.

Granted that his music suffered and that he made little headway while he was cloistered in the Villa, he used his time well in reading to further his neglected education. He turned to poetry, a sister art that was to influence all his later compositions. When alone in his "Etruscan tomb," as he called his green room, he read and studied the poems of Verlaine and Baudelaire. It is possible that he had a copy of the Fleurs du Mal with a preface by Théophile Gautier, who made the following analysis:

Les vers de Baudelaire, qui accepte les principales améliorations ou réformes romantiques, telles que la rime riche, la mobilité facultative de la césure, le rejet, l'enjambement, l'emploi du mot propre ou technique, le rythme ferme et plein, la coulée d'un seul jet du grand alexandrin, tout le savant mécanisme de prosodie et de coupe dans la strophe et la strophe, a cependant son architectonique particulière, ses formules individuelles, sa structure reconnaissable, ses secrets de métier, son tour de main si l'on peut s'exprimer ainsi, et sa marque C. B. qu'on retrouve toujours appliquée sur une rime ou sur un hémistiché. . . Il aime

l'harmonieux entrecroisement de rimes qui éloigne l'écho de la note touchée d'abord, et présente à l'oreille un son naturellement imprévu, qui se complétera plus tard comme celui du premier vers, causant cette satisfaction que procure en musique l'accord parfait.⁶

The close association of poetry with music, the fine appreciation of color, perfume and all that comes to one through the senses strongly resemble Debussy's own sensitive feelings. Like Baudelaire he, too, was confused and weighed down by his own suffering and mirrored in the poems he read were his own thoughts. Take for example "Correspondances":

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laisent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regard familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
--Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

Verlaine was not entirely new to Debussy for while he was still in Paris he had read the Fêtes Galantes in the library of the Vasnier home. He set to music a group of the poems and

⁶Charles Baudelaire, Les Fleurs du Mal, précédées d'une notice par Théophile Gautier. Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1920, p. L.

dedicated the songs to Mme. Vasnier. In his further reading of the poet while in Rome he familiarized himself with other suitable verses that he used later in his songs, and doubtless he found a kinship in such lines as:

Il pleure dans mon coeur
Comme il pleut sur la ville.
Quelle est cette langueur
Qui pénètre mon coeur?

In the Villa Medici, Debussy felt himself imprisoned even as was Verlaine when he wrote Romances sans paroles (1874) from which the foregoing passage is taken. And again, from the Poèmes saturniens, he found his own tormented state of mind expressed in,

Et je m'en vais
Au vent mauvais
Qui m'emporte
De çà, de là,
Pareil à la
Feuille morte.

Beside the poetry of his native land he had access to translations of Shakespeare and Dante Gabriel Rossetti to which he gave time and thought. From the latter he chose the poem La Damoiselle élue for his final Envoi de Rome. It was to be a cantata for solo voices, chorus, and orchestra. Although the idea was conceived at the Villa and the writing of it begun there, he did not finish the work until long after he returned to Paris, when he felt himself free and able to write as he desired.

Twice he fled from the Villa de Medici, the second time to return to his beloved Paris where a new life for him began. He haunted the cabarets of Montmartre at night and frequented the brasseries. He had thrown off the yoke of the academicians and was through with laureates and envois. Except for regular visits with Paul Dukas, he shunned all other musical associates. Achille-Claude Debussy was no more. From that time on he was known only as Claude Debussy.

By chance, shortly after his return to Paris, he met M. Léon Bailly who was not only a publisher but one who fostered and gathered around him in the back room of the Librairie de l'Art Indépendant struggling young geniuses, the future poets and artists of the impressionists and the symbolists. It was M. Bailly who published Debussy's earlier compositions and it was he who introduced him to Mallarmé, Verlaine, Henri de Régnier and other poets who became his intimate friends.

He was always a welcomed guest at the Mallarmé Tuesdays where he knew he was understood and appreciated. In this artistic atmosphere, there was companionship and a free exchange of ideas that immediately affected Debussy's life and career.

The dominating figure, "l'homme au châte, le grand, le beau, le mystérieux Mallarmé" is lauded by Poizat in the following excerpt from Du Classicisme au Symbolisme:

Comme nous l'avons aimé! Quelle aristocratie unique il y avait dans ses manières infiniment courtoises! Quelle ardente, quelle délicieuse, quelle entraînant et tendre mélancolie dans le spirituel sourire, un peu voilé, de ses beaux yeux et de son fin visage! Quelle inoubliable musique était sa voix! Quel instrument était son âme! Et comme de son index levé il nous désignait l'invisible! La lampe de Psyché à la main, chaque mardi soir, il nous invitait à descendre avec lui dans les ténèbres que font les choses, il écartait les ombres et nous montrait sous leurs robes de rêves et leurs diadèmes de symboles, les réalités suprêmes et leur sens secret! Car il se refusait à croire que 'nous fussions simplement les Messieurs que nous paraissions' et dans la grossière, plate et ridicule parade de la vie il ne voyait, comme Baudelaire, qu'une parodie allégorique, qu'une énigme dont il fallait trouver la clef. Chaque mardi soir, de neuf heures à minuit, partant de n'importe quel petit fait, et par le moyen des analogies, il nous reconstruisait les mille poèmes de la vie profonde et nous promenait dans son domaine enchanté, nous hommes modernes, à qui il savait parler leur langue, mais constamment transcendante.⁷

Debussy soon found the key of which Mallarmé spoke. According to his own musical pattern, he now began to compose without restraint and it was not long before he was spoken of as one who possessed distinct individuality and artistry. Besides devoting himself to music, he also served as a critic for La Revue Blanche and later for Gil Blas. Self-taught as a writer, his criticisms were highly praised and he was considered a master in his treatment of any topic.

⁷Alfred Poizat, Du Classicisme au Symbolisme. Paris: La nouvelle revue critique, 1929, pp. 182-83.

Although he had studied with two great French composers, Gounod and Cesar Franck, and in his travels he had met Verdi, Borodin, Brahms, and Wagner, he now had nothing in common with them. He was carrying out what he felt was his mission--to free music as did the symbolists with poetry.

"La mission de la poésie est d'ouvrir une fenêtre sur cet autre monde, qui est en fait le nôtre, de permettre au moi d'échapper à ses limites et de se dilater jusqu'a l'infini. Par ce mouvement d'expansion s'ébauche on s'accomplit le retour à l'unité de l'esprit."⁸

Satisfied at last that he was free to write as he desired his life now became extremely active and productive. He was recognized as a composer, conductor, pianist, and critic before many years had passed after his return to Paris. Fame and honor seldom accorded an artist in life were showered upon him. He was named for a vacancy in the Académie des Beaux-Arts but death came to him before he was accepted. He was appointed a member of the supreme council of the music section of the Paris Conservatoire and did not hesitate to criticize the teaching methods that he opposed in his earlier years as a student. His government honored him by bestowing upon him the cross of the Legion of Honor. Not only was he recognized in France as a great composer but throughout the whole musical world he was

⁸Alfred Poizat, op. cit., p. 22.

eminent and great homage was accorded him.

His affairs of the heart were numerous. We first saw the heartbroken youth parted from Sophie von Meck; next he was swept away by the charm of Mme. Vasnier. When he returned from Rome, it was Gabrielle Dupont, familiarly known as Gaby, "la demoiselle aux yeux verts," who infatuated him. His first marriage took place with Rosalie Texier, a dressmaker and Gaby's friend, but he soon tired of her and divorce followed. Another married woman then attracted him. It was Mme. Emma Bardac, a concert singer and a person of culture and refinement. After several years of complications they finally married and their union was a very happy one. Their little daughter, Chou-chou, was a great joy to them. In his later years Debussy could hardly be called "le grand solitaire," for he was one of a family and loved his home.

The last years of his life were spent in a long agony of suffering from cancer. Though weak and ill he continued to write. Greatly saddened by the World War and unable to participate in it, he showed his patriotism by signing his name as "Claude Debussy, musicien français." On March 25, 1918, while Paris was being bombarded, death mercifully came to him.

CHAPTER II

During the last twenty years of the nineteenth century in Paris, art and artists were searching for new idioms of expression to break away from traditional and outworn conventional standards. In poetry Verlaine and Mallarmé expressed new theories that words should be symbols to suggest rather than express; they were not concerned with ideas but rather with the musical sound of words that had the power to evoke sensations and that would appeal to the emotions and stimulate the imagination--"un mystère dont la lecteur doit chercher la clef."

Theirs was a new way of looking at the world--a new mysticism, a new magic. Odor, color, music and rhythm were blended in a veiled and elusive suggestiveness.

Le symbolisme, ce fut surtout l'entrée du rêve dans la littérature, ce fut le retournement du regard du dehors au dedans, la contemplation du reflet des choses en nous comme en une eau endormée, notre oreille tendue à des musiques singulières qui montaient de nous et dont les rythmes différaient étrangement des rythmes accoutumés des Parnassiens, lesquels, si bien scandés, nous semblaient réglés comme des marches militaires. . . Le symbolisme fut, en effet, une violente réaction contre tout ce qui l'avait précédé, une réaction pleine de colère contre tout ce à quoi la génération nouvelle se sentait impuissante et particulièrement contre le cabotinage personnel. ¹

¹Alfred Poizat, Le Symbolisme, La Renaissance du Livre, Paris, 1919, pp. 135-136.

Debussy's reactionary thoughts coincided in every detail with the foregoing summary. What he was striving to do for music, the symbolists had already accomplished for poetry. Once in the sanctuary of Stephane Mallarmé's apartment where he associated with Verlaine, Henri de Regnier, Maeterlinck, and other poets, he found a perfect accord and harmony of thought. There came to him the needed impetus to carry his own thoughts to realities.

From a special number of the Revue Musicale, Vallas quotes the following words of Paul Dukas who was the only other musician known to have been a regular guest at the "Mardi Soirs."

Verlaine, Mallarmé, Laforgue nous apportaient des tons nouveaux, des sonorités nouvelles. Ils projetaient sur les mots des lueurs qu'on n'avait encore jamais vues; ils usaient de procédés inconnus des poètes leur devanciers; ils faisaient rendre à la matière verbale des effets dont on ne soupçonnait pas, avant eux, la subtilité ou la force; par dessus-tout, ils concevaient les vers ou la prose comme des musiciens; ils leur donnaient des soins de musiciens, et, comme des musiciens encore, combinaient les images et leur correspondance sonore. La plus forte influence qu'ait subie Debussy est celle des littérateurs. Non pas celles des musiciens.²

Inspired by the Symbolistes, Debussy transferred their technique to his own field of endeavor and created a new musical art. Into his music he wrote those veiled harmonies, liquid

²Léon Vallas, op. cit., p. 25.

and flowing rhythms and fragmentary melodies that aimed to lead his listeners into a world of fantasy and dreams. His music is intangible, remote and elusive, but in its exquisite and delicate loveliness of color and magic atmosphere are found new beauties and a power to suggest the hidden spirit.

In his music one finds all the aspirations of the Symbolistes: "Ils aspiraient à l'ombre, au mystère, à l'obscurité; ils rêvaient d'une autre prosodie, plus gauche, mais plus ingénue. Ils voulaient des vers qui ne gardassent des anciens vers que l'âme subtile et délicatement sonore, des vers quasi-immatériels et qui ressemblaient à des incantations magiques, une sorte de musique abstraite, ne s'adressant plus à l'oreille mais à l'esprit directement, et capable de remuer, par de simples allusions, tout un monde d'émotions et de pensées."³

Paul-Marie Verlaine held an interest for Debussy throughout the greater part of his life. As early as 1882 he dedicated his first series of Fêtes Galantes to the melodious "Fay," Mme. Vasnier and in 1904 the dedication to the second series read "à la petite Mie" identified years later as Mme. Emma Bardoc who afterwards became Mme. Debussy.

"De la musique encore et toujours!" To Debussy all of Verlaine's poems suggested song and for a time, so completely

³Poizat, Le Symbolisme, p. 138.

was the musician under the spell of the poet that he found it difficult to choose the verses to set to music that would permit him to further enhance their beauty and give them wings to soar to higher heights--"Qu'on sent qui fuit d'une âme en allée vers d'autres yeux à d'autres amours."

Debussy's first selection, taken from Verlaine, was "Mandoline" written when he was twenty-one years old, before he won the Prix de Rome and several years before he met his favorite poet. In "Mandoline," the mood of the poem is admirably captured in the music which flows in rhythmic delicacy. It is a langourous serenade and evokes the ardor of youthful gallants who woo their fair ladies under the sighing branches.

Tourbillonnent dans l'extase
D'une lune rose et grise,
Et la mandoline jase
Parmi les frissons de brise.

A reflection of Debussy's own moods and feelings is most apparent in the Ariettes Oubliées composed in 1888. Ardor, impetuosity, anguish and disappointment are mingled with the longings and desires of a lonely dreamer steeped in serene melancholy and revery.

1

C'est l'extase langoureuse,
C'est la fatigue amoureuse,
.
.
.
.
.
.
.
.
Cette l'âme qui se lamente
.
.
.
.
.
.
C'est la nôtre, n'est-ce pas?

A langourous ecstasy is evoked in the mood of this song in which the soul laments and finds in Nature a reflection of itself in "le choeur des petites voix" and all the sounds and murmurs in the forest.

2

Il pleure dans mon coeur
Comme il pleut sur la ville,
Quelle est cette langueur
Qui pénètre mon coeur?

.

C'est bien la pire peine
De ne savoir pourquoi,
Sans amour et sans haine,
Mon coeur a tant de peine.

Beauty and emotions are translated into subtle images of tone in this diaphanous nature painting. A free, flowing rhythm suggests the falling rain, the reflections in the water, and all is sadness, fear, and apprehension.

3

L'ombre des arbres dans la rivière
embrumée
Meurt comme de la fumée. . .

The magic atmosphere of legend and dream awakens the emotions of love and lost hope in this composition. The pathetic and fearful song of the nightingale contrasts with the accompaniment in which sounds and color blend an exquisite picture of reflections in the water.

Trois Mélodies 1891

1

La mer est plus belle
Que les cathédrale.

.

La mer sur qui prie
La Vierge Marie!

A sincerity of feeling characterizes this song. It is simple and direct and in keeping with the lyrical beauty of the poem. The waves of the sea chant in praise of "la vierge," and the mood is religious and reverential.

2

Le son du cor s'afflige vers le bois
D'une douleur on veut croire orpheline.

Et l'air à l'air d'être un soupir d'automne,
Tout il fait doux par ce soir monotone.

Nature again is given voice in this melody. The impressions are remote and fleeting. While evening snow falls the sound of the horn complains and a wolf howls. Then all is still and a melancholy sadness gives way to resignation. Debussy frequently employs silence to evoke emotions. This he has done admirably in this song which he paints in gray monotones.

3

L'echelonnement des haies
Moutonne à l'infini, mer
Claire dans le brouillard clair

Qui sent bon les jeunes baies.
 De cloches · · · · ·
 Des flûtes
 Dans le ciel comme du lait.

Peace and tranquillity are evoked in this picture of rural England. The music is delicate and enchanting and changes as it flows in space while coloring the hedges, then gliding onward to the sea where emotions mingled with the clear mist.

From Verlaine's Aquarelles, Debussy chose "Green" to express the joy and ecstasy of youthful love alive to the cool, fresh panoply of spring.

Et puis voici mon coeur,
 qui ne bat que pour vous.

With "Spleen" he used dark tonal coloring to add sombreness to the poem.

Le ciel était trop bleu, trop tendre,
 La mer trop verte et l'air trop doux.
 Je crains toujours,--ce qu'est d'attendre!--
 Quelque fuite atroce de vous.

Fêtes Galantes 1892

1

"En Sourdine"

Veiled muted tones color this delicate song of love. The peaceful setting of the forest, the song of the nightingale and the attending lovers are framed in a dream-like fantasy.

Et quand, solennel, le soir
 Des chênes noirs, tombera,
 Voix de notre désespoir,
 Le rossignol chantera.

2

"Clair de Lune"

A Watteau canvas is given life; it is full of loveliness and enchantment in an atmosphere of shimmering moonlight mingled with song in a minor key. Melancholy pervades the accompaniment suggestive of artificial pleasure.

Tout en chantant sur le mode mineur
L'amour vainqueur et la vie opportune,
Ils n'ont pas l'air de croire à leur bonheur
Et leur chanson se mêle au clair de lune.

3

"Fantoques"

Scaramouche et Pulcinella
Qu'un mauvais dessein rassembla
Gesticulent, noirs sur la lune.

This song might be called a study in black and white. It is a fantasy that is shadowy and delicate. The accompaniment creates the atmosphere and is suggestive of the manipulations of the strings of the marionettes.

4

"Chevaux de bois"

Tournez, tournez, bons chevaux de bois,
Tournez, tournez au son des hautbois,
Tournez au son de l'accordéon,
Du violon, du trombone fous,
Tournez, tournez! le ciel en velours
D'astres en or se vêt lentement.

A spirit of fun and gaiety is evoked in this song with the colorful atmosphere of the fair and the strange sounds of the instruments out of tune. Merrymaking grows hilarious as the wooden horses of the merry-go-round gallop faster and faster. The music slackens as the pace lessens and all fades to a peaceful quiet under a velvet sky.

In speaking of Verlaine's poetry, Alfred Poizat says: "Ce que cette poésie évoque avec une intensité sans égale, c'est la musique de la joie ou de la souffrance quotidiennes, le sentiment de la vie, de la vie nue, physiologique, où la pensée n'est plus que le rêve du sang qui abreuve la chair."⁴

And in setting this poetry to music in his songs, it is with added intensity that Debussy weaves mystery, ardor, beauty and emotion into a delicate atmosphere filled with nuances-- "la nuance toujours."

Poetry to Stéphane Mallarmé was music; he had no interest in the meaning of words alone but rather in their musical sounds and rhythms which would produce emotions and suggest images. It is interesting to note that he wrote his last poems in the form of a page of music, showing how closely he wished to be allied to that art.

⁴Poizat, Du Classicisme au Symbolisme, p. 29.

"Stéphane Mallarmé est un sage qui nous invite, dans 'l'Après-midi d'un Faune,' à nous éblouir de l'Univers, en le contemplant à travers le Désir, comme à travers la pulpe lumineuse des raisons vides."⁵

This famous eclogue was a source of inspiration for one of Debussy's great orchestral preludes, a composition considered a masterpiece, and by many critics thought to be the finest tone-poem ever written, for he translated into music images and moods unlike any that had ever before been revealed by a composer.

With extremely delicate music Debussy suggests the drowsy, langorous faun wakening in the forest in the heat of the summer haze that causes him to day-dream of dancing nymphs, "Ces nymphes, je les veux perpetuer." The music intensifies as he indulges in his reverie of pagan delight and is climaxed as his fancy would have him believe that he has Venus in his arms. "Je tiens la reine!" Guilt gives way to desire. The vision vanishes and the music becomes limpid and shadowy like floating, glimmering clouds as the faun curls himself upon the warm soft grass to sleep and to dream again.

Sans plus il faut dormir en l'oubli du
blasphème,

.

⁵Ernest Raymond, La Melée Symboliste, Vol. II. Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1920, p. 61.

Couple, adieu; je vais voir l'ombre que
tu devins.

Vallas calls it a "chef-d'oeuvre, sans doute, de l'impres-
sionnisme musical, dont les trente-trois années qui ont passé
depuis sa révélation n'ont en rien atténué l'originalité ni
fané les couleurs et les nuances."⁶

In a letter to Jean Aubrey dated March 25, 1910 and pub-
lished in Le Monde Musical, Debussy quotes what Mallarmé him-
self said of the prelude: "Je ne m'attendais pas à quelque
chose de pareil! Cette musique prolonge l'émotion de mon poème
et en situe le décor, plus passionnément que la couleur."

It was not until the summer of 1913 that Debussy attempted
the settings for Mallarmé's Trois Poèmes. With them he is ex-
tremely subtle. All is fantasy and he has found music to en-
hance each jewel-like word with sheer beauty.

"Soupir"

Fidèle, un blanc jet d'eau soupire vers l'Azur!

The mood evoked is one of autumnal melancholy.

"Placet futile"

Princesse! à jalouer le destin d'une Hébé
Qui poind sur cette tasse au baiser de vos lèvres

Princesse, nommez nous berger de vos sourires.

⁶Léon Vallas, Claude Debussy. Paris: F. Alcan, 1926, p. 83.

A charming grace is added to this poem by its setting of a dignified minuet.

"Eventail"

O rêveuse, pour que je plonge
 Au pur délice sans chemin

 Sens-tu le paradis farouche
 Ainsi qu'un rire enseveli.

The musical cadences in the poem are developed in the delicate transparency of the rhythmic movement of the fan which symbolizes futility.

The Cinq Poèmes of Charles Baudelaire gave Debussy an opportunity to indulge freely in writing color impressions and illusions.

"Le Balcon"

Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon,
 Et les soirs au balcon, voilés de vapeurs roses;

.
 Nous avons dit souvent d'impérissables choses.

.
 Je sais l'art d'évoquer les minutes heureuses,
 Et revis mon passé blotti dans tes genoux.

.
 Ces serments, ces parfums, ces baisers infinis,
 Renaitront-ils d'un gouffre interdit à nos sondes,
 Comme montent au ciel les soleils rajeunis
 Après s'être lavés au fond des mers profondes?

In this song Debussy shows that like the poet he possesses "l'art d'évoquer les minutes heureuses" and he has translated into his music the rhapsody expressed in the poem and has given

life again to a summer evening of delight passed on a balcony while the sun is setting. Poem and song symbolize hope which in the final verse is felt in all its intensity for the music is filled with the confidence that as the sun rises from the depths of the sea happiness too will be reborn from an unfathomable abyss. "O serments! ô parfums! ô baisers infinis!"

The poem "Harmonies du Soir" is filled with imagery and harmonies.

Voici venir les temps où vibrant sur sa tige
Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir;
Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir,
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!

.
Le violon frémit comme un cœur qu'on afflige,

.
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir.

.
Un cœur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir!
Du passé lumineux recueille tout vestige!
Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se pige,
Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensor!

In this melancholy reverie there is a mingling of the sensuous and the spiritual which Debussy has richly colored with his music. The splendor of the heavens likened to a great repository and the dazzling refulgence from the monstrosity are emphasized in the accompaniment against the melancholy vocal declamation of "un cœur tendre qui hait le néant vaste et noir."

"Le Jet d'Eau"

Dans la cour le jet d'eau qui jase
Et ne se tait ni nuit ni jour,
Entretient doucement l'extase
Où ce soir m'a plongé l'amour.

.

O toi, que la nuit rend si belle,
Qu'il m'est doux, penché vers tes seins,
D'écouter la plainte éternelle
Qui sanglote dans les bassins!

Lune, eau sonore, nuit bénie,
Arbres qui prissonnez autour,
Votre pure mélancolie
Est le miroir de mon amour!

Again, as with many of his songs, Debussy makes use of the accompaniment to produce the mood of the poem. Vague, subtle, and elusive is the ceaseless play of water from the fountain bathed in moonlight, the trembling of the trees, and the lamentations of the ardent lovers.

"Recueillement"

Sois sage ô ma Douleur, et tiens-toi plus
tranquille
Tu réclamaïs le Soir; il descend; le voici
Une atmosphère obscure enveloppe la ville
Aux uns portant la paix, aux autres le souci.

"La Mort des Amants"

Nous aurons des lits pleins d'odeurs légères,
Des divans profonds comme des tombeaux,
Et d'étranges fleurs sur des étagères,
Encloses pour nous sous des cieux plus beaux.

.

Et plus tard un Ange, entr'ouvrant les portes,

Viendra ranimer, fidèle et joyeux,
Les miroirs ternis et les flammes mortes.

These two songs are filled with intense feeling and symbolize hope, melancholy, struggle, and sorrow. Debussy shows a true consciousness in them of an analysis made by Alfred Poizat that, "Il n'y a dans le monde et en poésie, que deux grandes réalités: l'amour et la mort toutes deux transcendantes parce qu'elles nous ramènent à la vérité de notre mystère. . . Et nous retrouverons partout chez Baudelaire l'idée que l'Univers visible n'est que la figure allégorique, l'indéchiffrable texte d'une autre réalité plus proportionnée à l'importance de l'homme et à la grandeur de Dieu, car, si les choses n'étaient que ce qu'elles sont, ce serait une affreuse dérision: qu'est-ce à dire, sinon que la vie ne peut être que surnaturelle?"⁷

From the poems of Paul Bourget, two of the settings of Debussy's songs are musical landscapes:

Voici que le printemps, ce fils léger d'Avril,
Beau page en pourpoint vert brodé de roses blanches.

"Paysage sentimental"

Le ciel d'hiver, si doux, si triste, si dormant,
Où le soleil errant parmi des vapeurs blanches.

The one is the freshness of spring that serves to evoke memories of happier days and contrast with the second, whose bleak skies of winter cast shadows upon troubled hearts and lost loves.

⁷Poizat, *Du Classicisme au Symbolisme*, pp. 83-84.

"Les Cloches"

Les feuilles s'ouvraient sur la bord des
branches délicatement,
Les cloches tintaient légères et franches,
Dans le ciel clément.

From early childhood Debussy was fascinated by bells and his music shows great variety in reproducing carillon-like tones. In "Les Cloches" the mood is dreamy, tranquil, and flowing with the constant background of the rhythm of the bells that sustains the imagery inspired by the poem.

In the Chansons de Bilitis of Pierre Louÿs, Debussy is wholly aware of pagan Greece.

"La flûte de Pan"

Pour le jour des Hyacinthies,
Il m'a donné une syrinx faite de
roseaux bien taillés,
Unis avec la blanche cire qui est
douce à mes lèvres comme le miel.

"Le Chevelure"

Cette nuit, j'ai rêvé
J'avais ta chevelure
Autour de mon cou.

"Le Tombeau des Naiades"

Les satyres sont morts,
Les satyres et les nymphes aussi.
.
Mais restons ici, où est leur tombeau.

The musical atmosphere is sensuous, passionate, and enchantingly graceful. To quote from Men of Music: "As songs

they have the remote, static beauty of a frieze about to be given life. Some such music whispers of the surface of Keats' Grecian Urn. The 'Chansons de Bilitis' are somewhat cold, incalculably distant, but extremely beautiful."⁸

Because of his fondness for the unusual Debussy went far beyond all his predecessors and his contemporaries in his selection of material and his treatment of it. It did not matter what type of poem he chose to set to music; in each and every one is reflected his own individual personality, liberty of thought and freedom of imagination. Detail is suppressed and emphasis placed on atmosphere which has the power to suggest a world of dreams through illusion.

C'est la musique avec sa subjectivité absolue, son immense pouvoir de suggestion, qui devait réaliser le rêve du symbolisme. Et ce fut Debussy qui fut le premier à entraîner la musique dans cette voie. . . Il a su s'adopter à toutes les mentalités. . . Il s'est penché sur tous les grands poètes de nos jours et aussi de la Renaissance; il les a touchés de sa baguette magique, et les harmonies fines et nuancées, les atmosphères langoureuses et attendries, ont révélé des milliers de diamants qui gisaient, teintes, parmi les mots pas assez vivants.⁹

Debussy's highly individual style that was developed through the years by his close association with the symbolists

⁸W. Brockway and H. Weinstock, Men of Music. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1939, p. 573.

⁹Daniel Chennevière, Claude Debussy et son oeuvre. Paris: Durand et Fils, 1913, p. 116.

whose poems were a source of inspiration for him to set to music, had its beginning when he was a youth of fourteen. At that time he was impressed by a poem of Theodore de Banville called:

"Nuit d'étoiles"

Nuit d'étoiles, sous tes voiles
Sous ta brise et tes parfums,
Triste lyre, qui soupire
Je rêve aux amours defunts.

An instinctive feeling for harmonic freedom prompted the young reactionary to write a setting for the poem that would give wings to thought and would reflect the sadness of a dream of dead loves. The tendency toward a new musical idiom was evident in this song and carried through to perfection in the composition of the matured artist.

The earlier poets of France also claimed an interest for Debussy but it was not until the later years of his life that he set their poems to music. He wrote as one group Trois Chansons de France in 1904.

1

Le temps a laissé son manteau
De vent, de froidure et de pluie,
Et s'est vestu de broderie,
De soleil raillant, cler et beau.

--Charles d'Orléans.

2

"La Grotte"

Auprès de cette grotte sombre
 Où l'on respire un air si doux,
 L'onde lutte avec les cailloux
 Et la lumière avec que l'ombre.
 --Tristan l'Hermite.

3

Pour ce que Plaisance est morte
 Ce may suis vestu de noir.
 --Charles d'Orléans.

In these songs Nature again arouses the emotions. Music suggestive of wind and rain, a gentle breeze, limpid and liquid lights and shadows evoke the gladness of spring when winter's cloak is thrown off--the melancholy reminiscence near the dark grotto and May in mourning because Pleasure is dead.

The critics of Debussy may have a difference of opinion regarding some of his compositions but they all agree that in his interpretation of the poetry of François Villon he manifests the height of his genius.

In 1910, not many years before his death, he composed the Trois Ballades de Villon.

I

"Ballade de Villon à s'amyé"
 Triste et lent (avec une expression où il y a tant
 d'angoisse que de regret)

Faulse beauté, qui tant me couste cher,
 Rude en effect, hypocrite doulceur,
 Amour dure, plus que fer, a mas cher.

The music evokes the agony of the pain of a cankerous love that slowly eats away as rusts eat iron.

II

"Ballade que fait Villon à requeste de sa mère
pour prier Nostre-Dame"

Dame du ciel, regente terrienne,
Emperiere des infernaux palus,
Recevez moy, vostre humble chrestienne.

.

En ceste foy je vueil vivre et mourir.

Of this poem Louis Cons says "Elle est une des plus belles et une des dernières fleurs de la poésie religieuse du Moyen Age vers sa fin. . . Pour lui comme pour sa pauvre mère la Vierge est le seul refuge."¹⁰

For one who did not continue to live in the faith in which he was baptized, Debussy shows a devout and pious soul in addressing Our Lady and evokes the spirit of the Moyen Age.

III

"Ballades des femmes de Paris"

Prince aux dames parisiennes,
De bien parler donnez le prix.

Villon is gay and jovial in this ballad as he compares ladies of other lands with the "dames parisiennes," and in his setting Debussy enhances it with charm and flowing, rhythmic grace.

¹⁰Louis Cons, Anthologie Littéraire de la Renaissance Française. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931, p. 11.

That Debussy was gifted with the imagination of a genius and possessed the finer sensibilities that made it possible for him to reach the peak of artistry in music is brought out in the study of him by Louis Laloy.

Il était réservé à Claude Debussy de nous rendre le musicien humaniste, sensible à toutes les beautés, sachant lire, sachant écrire à l'occasion, et surtout sachant vivre. . .

Claude Debussy fut le sauveur, parce qu'il venait au temps marqué, parce qu'il avait médité l'exemple des arts fraternels, et surtout parce qu'il avait écouté les voix de la nature.¹¹

¹¹Louis Laloy, Claude Debussy. Les Bibliophiles fantaisistes, 1909, pp. 25 and 73.

CHAPTER III

In October, 1889, Debussy paid his last visit to Bayreuth. Once an ardent admirer of Wagner, he now returned to Paris disillusioned and no longer in accord or even in sympathy with the German master. He had a different conception of operatic art and contended that music should convey the inexpressible. To his friend, Ernest Guiraud, his former professor at the Conservatoire, he confided: "Je rêve de poèmes qui ne me condamnent pas à perpétrer des acts longs, pesants; qui me fournissent des scènes mobiles, diverses par les lieux et le caractère; où les personnages ne discutent pas, mais subissent la vie et la sort."¹

Where would he find the poet to satisfy his desires? He searched for one whose theories were like unto his own.

Celui qui, disant les choses à demi, me permettra de graffer mon rêve sur le sieu; qui concevra des personnages dont l'histoire et la demeure ne seront d'aucun temps, d'aucun lieu; qui ne m'imposera pas despotiquement la scène à faire et me laissera libre, ici ou là, d'avoir plus d'art que lui et de parachever son ouvrage. Mais qu'il n'ait crainte! Je ne suivrai pas les errements du théâtre lyrique où la musique prédomine isolement; où la poésie est reléguée et passe au second plan, étouffée par l'habillage musical, trop lourd. Au théâtre de musique on chante trop. Il faudrait chanter quand cela en vaut la peine et réserver les accents pathétiques. Il doit y avoir des différences dans l'énergie

¹Léon Vallas, Claude Debussy et son temps, p. 68.

de l'expression. Il est nécessaire par endroits de peindre en camaïen et de se contenter d'une grisaille. . . Rien ne doit ralentir le marche du drame.²

Three years passed since Debussy so expressed himself; then in the spring of 1892 Maeterlinck's poetic drama, Pelléas et Mélisande, was published in Brussels. During the summer of that same year Debussy picked up a copy of the play in one of the bookshops of Paris. He was carried away with enthusiasm for he had found an ideal text to set to music. No sooner had he read the play than musical themes came to his mind suggestive of the mysterious characters and legendary atmosphere. These he immediately jotted down. It was the beginning of an opera entirely different from any ever before written, a work that he labored over meticulously for ten years, polishing and carefully revising it and often destroying page upon page that he had spent hours creating. When finally completed and presented at the Opéra Comique, although it suffered severely from the pens of many critics, it was enthusiastically received and praised by others and came to be regarded as a great masterpiece of the century.

A writer of our own day says:

The place of Pelléas in the upper brackets of the lyric drama depends on qualities which are peculiar to it, and which are momentous in their

²Ibid., p. 68.

relation to the operatic form, even more than on the individuality of the musical idiom. The work holds its unique position in the theater because of

1. The word setting, which enables the sung text to move with almost the naturalness of speech;

2. The suggestive background of the orchestra, which supplies for the drama what may be termed a tonal envelope, without constituting itself either an accompaniment for the singers or a series of symphonic expressions in competition with them;

3. The mood expressiveness of the score which in its reticence and lack of emotional stress takes on the mystery of the other-worldly, and ends in being profoundly human in its sympathy and its pathos.³

The Opera

Act I.

The opening theme suggests the haunting and melancholy atmosphere of the forest and the foreboding and fatalistic doom that is destined to engulf the characters. The episode of the meeting of the wounded Golaud, lost in the woods, with the frightened Mélisande who sits trembling and weeping at the edge of the well is treated by Debussy with utmost simplicity and reserve. The poet's words are chanted to soft chordal accompaniment and at times the voices declaim alone. The episode ends with uncertainty and vagueness as Mélisande asks timidly "Où allez-vous?" Plaintive chords that suggest evil premonition accompany Golaud's reply, "Je ne sais pas--Je suis perdu aussi."

³Oscar Thompson, Debussy, Man and Artist. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1934, p. 347.

Imminent doom and disaster are reflected in the closing theme.

Six months pass. Geneviève reads to Arkel the letter that Golaud has written to Pelléas telling of his marriage to Mélisande, a creature as strange and mysterious as the day he first met her. In plain chant--a tone speech of beauty, accompanied by organ-like chords, she begins as the score indicates--simplement et sans nuances--"Un soir, je l'ai trouvée tout en pleurs. Je ne sais ni son âge, ni qui elle est." The music ceases abruptly and in a choked voice, she reads on "et sanglote si profondément qu'on a peur." A gripping fear is marked by the interlude that follows while she waits for King Arkel's comment, "Cela peut nous paraître étrange, parce que nous ne voyons jamais que l'envers des destinées, l'envers même de la nôtre." This solemn declamation is followed by powerful orchestral music suggesting resignation to the inevitable. Arkel sings--avec une émotion grave--"Qu'il en soit comme il a voulu; je ne me suis jamais mis en travers d'une destinée; il sait mieux que moi son avenir."

Geneviève orders a lamp put up in the tower to welcome Golaud and Mélisande and the scene closes with a brief theme of heightened hope that gradually fades away symbolizing what is to follow.

Gloom and solitude surround the old castle and a slow, soft, melancholy theme adds a sombreness to the dark gardens and

dense forest that frighten Mélisande who walks with Geneviève. The music becomes intensified as fear engulfs Mélisande; it is symbolic of her tortured soul. Suddenly it brightens and from Geneviève comes a ray of hope: "Regardez de l'autre côté, vous aurez la clarté de la mer." Pelléas appears and joins them. The three contemplate the calm still sea.

"Nous aurons une tempête cette nuit; il y en a toutes les nuits depuis quelque temps et cependant elle est si calme maintenant."

A ship leaves port, sailors voices are heard gradually fading away in the distance.

"On s'embarquerait sans le savoir et l'on ne reviendrait plus."

The music envelopes the scene; it is haunting and oppressive, full of foreboding and doom.

As the act ends Pelléas tells of his plans to leave. Mélisande's ray of hope vanishes. Deeply stirred she whispers, "Oh! pourquoi partez-vous?" So soft that it fades to 'presque plus rien' the music is suggestive of the distressed hearts.

Act II.

To escape the stifling heat of noonday in the gardens, Pelléas and Mélisande find relief by the old abandoned well, the "Fountain of the Blind." The music evokes the freshness of

the cool clear water that once had miraculous powers and the stillness and seclusion of the setting. Nature is attuned with love and there is gladness and lightsome joy expressed in voice and orchestra that surges on in animation as happiness increases until suddenly Mélisande drops her wedding ring that she had been toying with and it falls into the fountain. The castle bell rings; then there is silence. Frenzy seizes Mélisande with the thought of what Golaud will say when he discovers her loss. Her fears increase and the music becomes more agitated until Pelléas calmly declaims "La vérité, la vérité." An interlude follows that suggests suspense, uncertainty, guilt, and punishment.

Mélisande goes to attend Golaud who has been wounded. Voice and orchestra suggest her preoccupied and troubled soul as she solicitously inquires about his comfort. She weeps, "Je ne suis pas heureuse ici." Golaud realizes that life in the old castle for one so young is sad. The music augments the voice in the utter gloomy picture of the old castle and its aging inhabitants. There is tenderness and a hopeful promise of a brighter future and the music heightens in tone and color until Golaud discovers the lost ring. The orchestra is silent. "La bague de nos nocces, où est-elle?" he declaims. Angrily he demands that she recover it and sends her away to find Pelléas to

aid her in the search. This dramatic moment is enhanced by the orchestra depicting the cave by the sea, the lovely colored seashells and the rising tide; they are fleeting impressions symbolic of Mélisande's emotions. As the scene closes the distraught maid sobs "Je ne suis pas heureuse" and goes to Pelléas. An interlude augments the unhappy situation.

As a nature-painter Debussy adds color and significance to the scene of the dark grotto against a starless sky, to the perilous path that leads to the cave within, and to the roar of the grotto and the distant sea. This sinister picture clears as Pelléas sings to a joyful accompaniment, "Oh, voici la clarté!" But with the flood of light Mélisande is horrified at the sight of three beggars asleep and cries out, "Allons-nous en." The music expresses the weakness of Mélisande's heart and body and slowly and quietly fades away.

Act III.

A legendary and fairy-like atmosphere is evoked by the music that speaks of a night of loveliness with innumerable stars in the sky. With delicate lyrical beauty Debussy paints the background as Mélisande leaning from the window of one of the towers of the chateau lets her hair fall in cascades to envelope Pelléas. "Ils m'inondent encore jusqu'aux genoux! Et ils sont doux, ils sont doux comme s'ils tombaient du ciel!" he

sings. Then with growing animation and passion the music supports the ecstasy of the lovers, but changes suddenly as the startled Mélisande sings, "J'entends un bruit de pas. Laisse-moi!" It is Golaud who comes upon them. "Ne jouez pas ainsi dans l'obscurité," he declaims while the orchestra is silent. Then laughing nervously he remarks, "Vous êtes des enfants. Quels enfants!" Detached chords accentuate his nervousness and he leaves taking Pelléas with him. There is an interlude softly reminiscent of fleeting happiness which works up with an animated crescendo and then closes softly on 'tres lointain.'

A theme marked 'lourd et sombre' gives out the horrors of the scene of the underground vaults of the castle. Golaud sings of the stagnant water and the stench of death. "Voyez-vous le gouffre Pelléas?" he asks, and here the orchestra evokes a picture of deep and dark significance. Pelléas cries out, "J'étouffe ici, sortons."

They leave in silence and relief comes to Pelléas as he breathes again on the terrace. The music is 'joyeux et clair.' He sings of the sea and its fresh breeze. Here Debussy has painted a sympathetic sea, soothing and refreshing, and later he colors the freshly watered flowers along the wall that give off a fragrant scent in striking contrast to the previous scene. The bells of noon ring and there is joy and gaiety in this pas-

sage as 'les enfants descendent vers la plage pour se baigner.' Mélisande appears at a window in the tower and the happy music ends as Golaud in serious declamation warns Pelléas that what he overheard the night before must not be repeated. "Ce n'est pas la première fois que je remarque qu'il pourrait y avoir quelque choses entre vous."

Golaud, distraught with the thought of growing old and with the fear that all will forsake him, questions little Yniold about what he knows of Pelléas and Mélisande. The music works up in intensity and parallels the growing rage and jealousy in the old man. It is climaxed in frustration as he cries out, "Ah! misère de ma vie!" while heavy sinister chords re-iterate again and again his hopelessness. He laments, "Je suis ici comme un aveugle qui cherche son trésor au fond de l'océan. Je suis ici comme un nouveau-né perdu dans la forêt." In the closing interlude, the music pulsates with pangs of jealousy and becomes more and more animated and agitated suggesting the rising anger in Golaud's heart.

Act IV.

Mélisande is stunned to learn that Pelléas is going away. She agrees to meet him at the Fountain of the Blind for, "Ce sera le dernier soir." A tender episode follows as Arkel tells Mélisande how much he has pitied her. Hopefully he sings, "Un

peu de joie et un peu de soleil vont enfin rentrer dans la maison." With the music a light breaks through dispelling the darkness. It symbolizes Mélisande's fair and gentle youth.

"Et c'est toi, maintenant, qui va ouvrir la porte à l'ère nouvelle que j'entrevois." Muted chords in marked contrast suggestive of youth and old age accompany Arkel's theme, "Les vieillards ont besoin quelquefois de toucher de leurs lèvres le front d'une femme ou la joue d'un enfant pour croire encore à la fraîcheur de la vie et éloigner un moment les menaces de la mort."

Golaud at this moment appears and denounces Mélisande in angry accusations. The music is sharp and accented as he seizes her by the hair and throws her to the ground with a maddened shriek. Brought to his senses by Arkel and 'affectant un calme soudain,' Golaud leaves all to fate. "J'attendrai le hasard." The scene closes as old Arkel sings compassionately, "Si j'étais Dieu, j'aurais pitié du coeur des hommes." Debussy has found music full of pity and understanding for the poet's words and the closing interlude is one of compassion and profound emotion.

The love scene by the fountain which takes place in this act had a special appeal to Debussy when he read the play for the first time. He was of the same opinion as Maeterlinck who

contended that the théâtre should represent the true inner life, one of contemplation. In this scene which he chose above all others in the play to be the first to set to music, Debussy's principles are most clearly defined and executed. The action is continuous and uninterrupted; the musical emotion and the emotions of the characters in the drama are made simultaneous; the music does not hinder the changes of sentiment and passion felt by the characters, and in their gestures, their cries, their joys and in their sorrows there is perfect liberty without any restraint.

As the scene opens Pelléas declaims sadly, "C'est le dernier soir. Il faut que tout finisse. J'ai joué comme un enfant autour d'une chose que je ne soupçonnais pas." The music then augments his state of fear and his desire to flee without seeing Mélisande again. "J'ai joué, en rêve au tour des pièges de la destinée. . . Je ferais mieux de m'en aller sans la revoir." Presently Mélisande appears and music of ecstatic joy and lyrical beauty colors the episode as the lovers meet, until it is climaxed with a moment of significant silence. The feeling of heightened and profound emotion is expressed in extreme simplicity without orchestra and in the natural intonations of spoken French, Pelléas is heard to sing, "Je t'aime," to which in a whisper Mélisande responds, "Je t'aime aussi."

Clanging chords accompany the grating sound of the castle gates as they are closed for the night. From the shadow of a tree Golaud spies upon the lovers, who seeing him, desperately bid each other farewell. Pelléas sings, "Oh, oh! toutes les étoiles tombent!" Groups of descending chords evoke the falling stars and suggest the inevitable doom. Golaud strikes Pelléas down with his sword. Mélisande in breathless flight sings, "Oh! Oh! Je n'ai pas de courage!" and the act ends with an interlude expressing terror.

Act V.

A sad and sombre atmosphere is evoked by music full of tenderness and feeling that sustains the poet's words in this final act. Mélisande, pale and wan, lies ill in bed. Golaud, tormented with remorse, accuses himself of her illness. He begs her forgiveness and sings, "Je t'ai fait tant de mal, Mélisande. Je ne puis pas te dire le mal que je t'ai fait. Mais je le vois, je le vois si clairement aujourd'hui, depuis le premier jour. Et tout est de ma faute, tout ce qui est arrivé." The music expresses repentance but suddenly it changes suggesting the reawakening jealousy in Golaud's heart. He demands the truth. "As-tu aimé Pelléas?" She answers simply and quickly, "Mais oui, je l'ai aimé. Où est-il?" The fury in Golaud's mind increases and sharp accented music sug-

gests his anxiety to learn the truth. Ominous chords accompany his declamation, "Je ne saurai jamais! Je vais mourir ici comme un aveugle!" Arkel enters and the music is again expressive of tenderness and compassion. He shows Mélisande her child and as if in prophesy the mother mournfully sings, "Elle est petite--Elle va pleurer aussi. J'ai pitié d'elle."

The serving-women of the castle enter and stand silently along the wall to await Mélisande's death. A brief interlude of short detached tones bespeaks the imminent gloom. Desperately, Golaud tries to speak again to Mélisande alone but Arkel quiets him, aware that a soul is about to depart from earth. The hushed solemnity of the music evokes the sombre atmosphere of the death chamber, and gravely the old man sings, "Il faut parler à voix basse, maintenant. Il ne faut plus l'inquieter. L'âme humaine est très silencieuse." The spirit of Mélisande is symbolized in the music that abounds in pathos and which accompanies the words of the poet, "C'était un petit être si tranquille, si timide et si silencieux. C'était un pauvre petit être mystérieux comme tout le monde."

As the serving-women kneel in prayer, the soul of Mélisande departs.

"C'est au tour de la pauvre petite," is Arkel's solemn comment. Another life remains to replace the turbulent spirit

of Mélisande. The closing interlude symbolizes the flight of a soul that in life was shrouded in mystery and remained mysterious to the end.

Did Debussy in his score of Pelléas et Mélisande accomplish all that he hoped to do when first he read the Maeterlinck drama? The words of Romain Rolland are most convincing that he did:

Le théâtre musical, tel que nous l'imaginons en France (sinon tel qu'on nous le sert), doit offrir l'harmonie des arts qui concourent à le former; nous demandons que la balance soit tenue égale entre la poésie et la musique; et si leur équilibre devait être rompu, nous préférerions toujours que ce fût au profit de la poésie, cette musique, plus consciente et plus raisonnée. . . C'est pour être revenu, avec des moyens nouveaux, à cet idéal de sobriété musicale et de désintéressement, qui met le génie du compositeur au service du drame, que Debussy a été si fort. Il n'a point cherché à dominer le poème de Maeterlinck, à l'engloutir sous les flots de sa musique; il s'est assimilé à lui, au point qu'à l'heure présente aucun Français ne serait plus capable de penser à une page du drame, sans que la musique de Debussy chante aussitôt en lui.⁴

⁴Romain Rolland, Musiciens d'aujourd'hui. Paris: Hachette et Cie., 1908, pp. 200-201.

CHAPTER IV

In no other land but France could music so thoroughly national such as Debussy wrote be born. He was a true child of France, a romantic dreamer, an ardent lover of nature and the beautiful as well as sensuous, imaginative, and artistic. Typical Gallic qualities are evident in all his compositions; they are logical, dignified, devoid of extravagance, and possess an artistic finesse and restraint. He is a glowing example of French culture and purity of taste. Blessed with a penetrating mind, a keen musical ear, and a vivid imagination, together with the opportunities of the artistic environment into which he was thrown, it is not surprising that he should develop a unique and inimitable style and one far surpassing his predecessors.

"He was the poet of mists and fountains, clouds and rain; of dusk and of glints of sunlight through the leaves; he was moonstruck and seastruck and a lost soul under a sky bespent with stars. All his senses were tributary to his musical inspiration. . . In transmuting Nature into harmony he has made sonorous his own emotions."¹

In his orchestral works and his piano compositions the influence of the symbolists and impressionists is quite as appar-

¹Thompson, Debussy, Man and Artist, p. 23.

ent as was traced in dealing with his songs, the Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune, and the opera, Pelléas et Mélisande.

Seul de tous ses contemporains, Debussy, qui aurait voulu être peintre et qui devait s'essayer dans la poésie, manifestait alors une sensibilité en accord parfait avec celles des impressionnistes et des symbolistes. Comme eux il voulait éviter les lignes régulières et les rythmes symétriques en arrêtant des formes, des coupes, inédites.²

His greatest orchestral achievement, written in 1905, consists of a group of impressionistic sketches whose very titles have a poetic meaning. Not in any other composition did he employ such large orchestral effects or give such free rein to his imagination. To this work, he gave the title:

La Mer (trois esquisses symphoniques)

1. De l'aube à midi sur la mer.
2. Jeux de vagues.
3. Dialogue du vent et de la mer.

Debussy's sea is a sea of dreams, vaporous and evanescent, a tone painting purely subjective, a mystic vision of the ever-changing and restless aspects of the deep, terrifying and foreboding, yet it beckons and lures with its weird and capricious enchantment, its mysterious voices and diaphanous phantoms. The listener is wont to embark upon that unknown and phantasmal sea of dreams to visit lands apart from a world of reality where longings and desires are satisfied.

²Vallas, Claude Debussy et son temps, p. 75.

Three Nocturnes for orchestra written from 1897 to 1899 include:

"Nuages"
 "Fêtes"
 "Sirènes" (scored for orchestra
 and choir of women's voices, though they sing no
 words. It is treated as part of the instrumental
 fabric.)

Debussy was concerned only with the motion and rhythm of the objects in the Nocturnes. Again, it is not the reality but fantasias upon the objects and in his imagination he lingers in a fairy region. An explanation from Debussy himself gives significance to his work.

Le titre 'Nocturnes' veut prendre ici un sens plus général et surtout plus décoratif. Il ne s'agit donc pas de la forme habituelle du Nocturne, mais de tout ce que ce mot contient d'impressions et de lumières spéciales.

'Nuages': c'est l'aspect immuable du ciel avec la marche lente et mélancolique des nuages, finissant dans une agonie grise, doucement teintée de blanc.

'Fêtes': c'est le mouvement, le rythme dansant de l'atmosphère avec des éclats de lumière brusque, c'est aussi l'épisode d'un cortège (vision éblouissante et chimérique) passant à travers la fête, se confondant en elle; mais le fond reste, s'obstine et c'est toujours la fête et son mélange de musique, de poussière lumineuse participant à un rythme total.

'Sirènes': c'est la mer et son rythme innotrable, puis, parmi les vagues argentées de lune, s'entend, rit et passe le chant mystérieux des Sirènes.³

It is said that Debussy never visited Spain except to cross the frontier for one day to see a bull-fight in San Sebastian,

³Ibid., p. 92.

yet he was able to translate into highly colored sound what he imagined Spain to be--a Spain of his own desires. He chose to call it by the name the ancient Greeks gave it when he wrote his symphonic poem for orchestra in three sections:

Iberia

1. Par les rues et par les chemins.
2. Les Parfums de la nuit.
3. Le Matin d'un jour de fête.

Manuel de Falla, the Spanish composer, said of the composition, "the echoes from the villages, a kind of sevillana--the generic theme of the work--which seems to float in a clear atmosphere of scintillating light; the intoxicating spell of Andalusian nights, the festive gayety of a people dancing to the joyous strains of bands, guitars and bandurras . . . all this whirls in the air, approaches and receives, and our imagination is continually kept awake and dazzled by the power of an intensely expressive and richly varied music."⁴

In material and in his various forms of treatment for his piano compositions, Debussy employs only the subjects that are suitable to his own particular and novel style. With them he is still the poet and dreamer, ever creating an enchanting imaginative world through illusions and tonal images, thus rousing inward thoughts and emotions. He has searched for and found effective loveliness in color and atmosphere to create any mood

⁴Thompson, op. cit., p. 170.

he might wish to evoke.

Two particularly fine examples are to be found in the suites known as:

Images, Première série. 1905.
 Reflets dans l'eau.
 Hommage à Rameau.
 Mouvement.

Images, Deuxième série. 1908.
 Cloches à travers les feuilles.
 Et la lune descend sur le temple
 qui fut.
 Poissons d'or.

Mystery and rapturous beauty are woven together in these tone pictures; the clouds play upon the shimmering blue water; the silvery moonlight is luminous and liquid; the sound of bells carries from afar and mingles with the gentle swaying of the leaves; and vivid splashes of orange and gold suggest the grace of swimming fish.

"Picturesque though they are, they have a more profound significance. It is the world around us, but seen with an intense and unique vision, and the melancholy that pervades this music is no personal complaining but the underlying melancholy of human life itself."⁵

Of all his compositions, Debussy's two books of twenty-four preludes show him as the highly individual creative artist that he was. Each short work is distinctive in character and

⁵Constant Lambert, Music Ho! London: Faber and Faber, 1934, p. 35.

form and unlike any models of his predecessors. They are shadowy pictures with melting outlines and are purposely void of detail. They are as varied and unique as their unusual and significant titles and have come to be known as examples of sonorous impressionism.

Like the symbolists, Debussy went back to folk-lore and legends for subject matter as in "La Cathédrale engloutie" in which bells are heard from under the water as they ring from the church buried beneath the sea. Other compositions were inspired by a Greek frieze, a post card received from China and one from Spain, fireworks seen on a holiday, the eccentric wooden doll of the Folies Bergères, and boats lying at anchor. Nature alone was his inspiration for writing many other gems.

In giving titles to his preludes, which, by the way, he placed at the end rather than at the beginning of the work, he differs from other composers, for until his day preludes were known only by the opus number.

In the complete list of these compositions it seems fit to give the opening notations for the interpretation by the performer, for they partially suggest the impressionistic mood and atmosphere that Debussy intended to evoke with his music.

Douze Préludes, 1er livre

- I. "Danseuses de Delphes" (Lent et grave--doux et soutenu.)

- II. "Voiles" (Modéré--dans un rythme sans rigueur et caressent.)
- III. "La vent dans la plaine" (Animée--aussi légèrement que possible.)
- IV. "Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir" Baudelaire. (Modéré, harmonieux et souple.)
- V. "Les collines d'Anacapri" (Très modéré.)
- VI. "Des pas sur la neige" (Triste et lent.)
- VII. "Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest" (Animée et tumultueux.)
- VIII. "La fille au cheveux de lin" (Très calme et doucement expressif.)
- IX. "La sérénade interrompue" (Modérément animé.)
- X. "La cathédrale engloutie" (Profondément calme [dans une brume doucement sonore].)
- XI. "La danse de Puck" (Capricieux et léger.)
- XII. "Minstrels" (Modéré [nerveux et avec humeur].)

Douze Préludes, 2me livre

- I. "Brouillards" (Modéré--extrêmement égal et léger.)
- II. "Feuilles mortes" (Lent et mélancholique.)
- III. "La puerta del Vino" (Mouvement de Habanera.)
- IV. "Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses" (Rapide et léger.)
- V. "Bruyères" (Calme, doucement expressif.)
- VI. "General Lavine--eccentric" (Dans le style et le mouvement d'un cake-walk.)

VII. "La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune"
(Lent.)

VIII. "Ondine" (Scherzando.)

IX. "Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C." (Grave.)

X. "Canope" (Très calme et doucement triste.)

XI. "Les tierces alternées" (Modérément animée.)

XII. "Feux d'artifice"

"Debussy écoute la nature d'une oreille confidente. De tout ce qu'elle offre à ses yeux, à son tact, à son imagination, il fait de l'harmonie; il prête une conscience musicale à ce qui n'a point de conscience. Il est la faune et la naïade, le rêve de la lune sur les marbres et la mélancolie des terrasses, le poète du vent et de l'écume, de la mer et des eaux de tout ce qui est vapeur, fluid et nuages. Il saisit le soleil et le rythme des rayons. Toutes les eaux lui parlent, et la pluie même qui rafraîchit les pleurs du matin. . . Tout objet lui est sentiment et sa musique est une peinture de l'émotion par l'émotion: la subtile magie des accords en est l'instrument; et la nuance, le moyen dont il possède tous les secrets et tout-puissant alchimiste. La nuance est la fée de Debussy. La nuance est la variation dans la profondeur et dans le sentiment. . . la nuance est de l'esprit."⁶

⁶André Suarés, Debussy. Paris: Émile-Paul frères, 1922, pp.20-21.

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